

“SENT”
John 20:19-23

It's Easter Sunday evening. No-one's quite sure what's going on. Jesus died a couple of days ago and everyone saw it. He was buried in Joseph's tomb, and the authorities sealed it up and put a guard on it. This morning Mary went to the tomb to do all the stuff they didn't have time for on Friday evening as the Sabbath started, and she found the tomb open. She ran back to tell Peter and John, who rushed over to see what had happened. John could see that the grave had been disturbed and Peter actually went in to look around. The body of Jesus had disappeared. Then Mary had a strange encounter with someone she took to be the gardener, but who turned out to be Jesus, alive and apparently well. So she went back and told all the others what had happened.

But no-one was really expecting this. It didn't seem real. Their world was being turned upside down – first by the arrest of Jesus, when they thought he could have done something to resist it. Then by the death of Jesus, who had talked so much about life and the Kingdom. Then by the disappearance of the body when the authorities had done so much to make sure Jesus' corpse stayed where it was. And now by these tales of Mary who claimed to have seen Jesus and spoken to him. The disciples are naturally disorientated. And they are pretty sure – given the experience of Peter in the High Priest's courtyard – that the authorities are out to get them as well. Their identification with Jesus over the past week – as he came into Jerusalem on the donkey, as he ransacked the traders' stalls in the Temple, as they stood proudly by him while he was belittling the Pharisees – all of that has now led to their being marked men. So not only are they disorientated, they're scared as well. So they gather together for mutual support and to discuss what they're going to do next.

And then, to cap it all, suddenly Jesus himself is there in the middle of the room. No-one's let him in. The doors and windows are all closed. No-one's heard a knock or a door bang. But there he is, coolly standing there and greeting them with “Shalom alechem!” – the usual greeting amongst friends – “Peace be with you.” In one sense that's really reassuring. It's almost as if everything's just as it always was – apart from the fact that he was definitely dead only 48 hours ago. Is it a double? Is it some kind of dream? Are they experiencing some sort of mass hallucination?

So Jesus calmly pulls up his cloak and shows them the gash in his side where the spear went in. Then he holds out his hands so they can see the holes where the nails held him onto the cross. It's him alright. He proves to them that he's physically there: this is the reality of the situation. And he proves to them in that same way that he was really crucified and that he died. No doubts now. There's been a resurrection. He's back!

There must have been a huge sense of relief that flooded over the disciples. And John tells us that they were “*overjoyed*” – as we’d all be no doubt. [When I read this verse, I always remember a visit we had when I was at theological college from the Bishop of the Arctic, who told us, amongst other things, about the translation of the Bible into one of the Inuit languages. The Inuit are a dour people and the translator was trying to find the word they used for “joy”, but there never seemed to be any. Eventually, one evening as the huskies were being fed he asked his Inuit companion how he’d describe the obvious pleasure the dogs were getting when the meat appeared, because that was the most joyful thing he’d seen since coming to live in their community. The Inuit told him the word, which he dutifully wrote down and used in his translation of this passage, but when he eventually read it back to them some time later, the Inuit all smirked and one of them explained to him that what he’d put actually read, “When they saw the Lord, the disciples wagged their tails with glee.”]

Anyway, back to the story in English. Jesus hasn’t come back to see them just to renew acquaintances and give them a bit of a surprise. This is where the commission comes in John’s Gospel. This is where the mission of Jesus the Kingly Messiah, the mission of the Kingdom of God, is handed over. Jesus is alive, but he’s not going to stay with them much longer, so he tells them that they are to continue his work. It’s a bit like handing over responsibilities at the end of the shift. This is where the disciples, whom Jesus has been trying to train for three years, step into his sandals to continue what he has been doing. They are being sent out – the first little group of an ever-growing number of which we are now a part – to get involved in God’s plan to rescue and restore his creation and everyone within it. They are to be sent out as Jesus was sent out: “*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*” That’s quite a challenge, isn’t it? Particularly so when we look back through the Gospels and see what Jesus said about his own sending. Let’s think about what it means to be sent as Jesus was.

Sending is actually quite a theme in John’s Gospel. He mentions Jesus being sent by the Father nearly 40 times in his account of Jesus’ life and ministry and there are plenty of other references to it in the other Gospels as well. That sense of being sent – and the authority that comes with it – is now being passed on to these first disciples and then down through the centuries to all who call themselves disciples of Jesus. The first thing to get straight is what we are not sent to do. If we look back at *John 3:17*, where John records Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus that contains the wonderful words of *John 3:16* and the first reference to being “*born again*”, we read that Jesus said, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world ...*” We are not sent out to point the finger, to judge people, to tell them how awful they are – which is what some Christians have clearly felt was their remit over the years. If we see ourselves as being sent as Jesus was sent, that’s definitely not a part of the plan.

But Jesus goes on in that verse to say that, “*God sent his Son into the world ... to save the world through him.*” Now then, some of you will respond – quite rightly – that we cannot be sent to save the world because that was the unique calling of Jesus. We cannot die as a sacrifice. We cannot make atonement for the sins of others through our self-giving. After all, the Bible tells us that Jesus has done that once and for all. That’s all perfectly true, but it doesn’t mean that we now have no mission. (“Mission”, by the way, is a word based on the Latin word for “sent”. Maybe I should have said that earlier.) Our mission, the reason for our being sent, is to contribute to that project of bringing new life to men and women, to proclaim what Jesus has done.

As I say, there are many references to being sent in John’s Gospel and in the other Gospels. You can look some of them up for yourselves, if you like. But let’s look at one such reference in Luke’s Gospel. At the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he goes into the synagogue in Nazareth, his home town, and reads the Sabbath lesson from the Old Testament book of *Isaiah*. Having read some verses from *Isaiah 61*, he tells them that they actually apply to him. This is why he was sent: “*He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.*” He has been sent to preach justice and healing and to tell people that God’s on the case. Things are going to change.

And later on in that same chapter, Jesus sums it up in a way that fits in with what we have been learning about his – and about our – mission in Matthew’s Gospel. Listen to this: “*I must preach the Kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent*” (Luke 4:43). If Jesus is sending us as the Father sent him, then this is the absolute core message that we have to declare – the message of the Kingdom of God. And what does that mean? What’s this “*Kingdom of God*” stuff?

Well, for those of you who haven’t been following what we’ve been reading in Matthew’s Gospel – and for those who could do with a bit of revision – the message we have to proclaim is that God is going to return things to the state he originally intended them to be in. This world, which he created good and full of promise, has been distorted and perverted by the presence of evil. That’s why we have to cope with illness, disease, violence, poverty, inequality, abuse, injustice and all the rest. That’s why people are dying of cancer and being blown up by terrorists, why life is tough and creation is being spoilt, why many people have lost hope and don’t have any sense of optimism about the future – immediate and eternal. We’re all affected by it and it is not what God wants. But he is going to transform things and Jesus was sent not only as the herald of that – a task in which we as his followers now join him – but also as the inaugurator of that Kingdom – a task which he has completely fulfilled in his death and resurrection, so we don’t need to worry about doing that bit.

That's pretty awe-inspiring, isn't it? Jesus is entrusting us with that message. He is asking us – no commanding us – to get on and share that amazing message. By our words and by our actions we are to be proclaiming, as we thought about last week, that this is not all there is, that transformation is possible, that there is real hope for the future. Our lives day by day should be showing that we believe God's in charge, that we have been, as Peter put it, "*given new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*" (1 Peter 1:3). We have a purpose in life. We have, as Eugene Peterson translates it, "*everything to live for*". And when people see us living out our faith in Jesus and ask us what it's about, then we need to be ready to give them an answer and point out that it's only through Jesus, through faith in him, that we can live as we do, but that this hope, this participation in the life of the Kingdom of God is also available to them if they are prepared to trust in Jesus (otherwise, quite frankly, it's curtains for them).

Does that excite you – being part of this amazing plan of God? Being sent out to live it out as Jesus was sent? But it also maybe scares us a bit. We're slightly overawed at the prospect of doing what Jesus did – and, indeed, if we look at what he says in *John 14:12*, doing even greater things. I think Jesus was aware of the momentous nature of what he said to those bewildered and beleaguered disciples on that first Easter evening. That's why, after he'd said it, he breathed out and said "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" As ever, God doesn't call his followers to do anything without providing the resources.

And once again, we see how this fits in with this idea of our being sent as Jesus was sent. Do you remember how Jesus' mission started off? In *John 1:32-34* we read of Jesus' baptism – it's also recorded in the other Gospels, of course – and at that point the Holy Spirit is sent down to him looking rather like a dove. And a couple of chapters later on, Jesus himself says this: "*The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit*" (*John 3:34*). Paul, when writing to his young pastor friend, Timothy, who is struggling with the demands of his mission, tells him that when we receive the Spirit, it's not a spirit of fear, but of love and power (*2 Timothy 1:7*).

This is getting more and more exciting, if we really take it seriously. Think about it for a moment. You have made a decision to follow Jesus because you want to enjoy the benefits and privileges of the Kingdom of God – you want to know forgiveness for your sins, hope for the future and eternal life with God himself. That's already pretty good up to there. But now Jesus is saying, I want you to get involved in the very mission with which I was entrusted – God's Son, the Saviour of the world, the Kingly Messiah, is saying, "Come on, then. Do what I did. Tell other people about this amazing Kingdom and all its possibilities. This is a world that desperately needs to hear all about me, so get on and tell them – and show them by the way you live your life." Jesus is sharing this transformational mission with you!

But, as Jimmy Cricket would say, “There’s more!” As we take up the challenge that Jesus lays before us – and, to be honest, it’s not that much of a challenge because Jesus has promised his presence and his help – Jesus actually fills us with, baptises us in, covers us with (whatever image you want to use) his very own Holy Spirit. He provides the resources we need to do the job he’s given us. The Spirit can bring boldness, wisdom, insight, courage – whatever it is we need to do the job – just when we need it.

So don’t be like those first disciples were at the beginning of that first Easter evening – beleaguered, bewildered, inward looking, unsure what they were going to do. Recognise that you’re being sent like Jesus was – to make a difference, to live out the values of the Kingdom of God, to demonstrate to a world that seems to have lost hope that this is not all there is, that there is a hope-filled future ahead. Jesus’ mission, as we’ve seen, began with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. The disciples’ mission began with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Ask God again – or for the first time – this morning to breathe his Holy Spirit upon you. Accept the commission. Receive the Spirit. Change the world!

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But Jesus goes on in that verse to say that, *"God sent his Son into the world ... to save the world through him."* But we cannot die as a sacrifice. We cannot make atonement for the sins of others through our self-giving. After all, the Bible tells us that Jesus has done that once and for all. Our mission, the reason for our being sent, is to contribute to that project of bringing new life to men and women, to proclaim what Jesus has done.

Look at *Luke 4:14-21*. Jesus has been sent to preach justice and healing and to tell people that God's on the case. Also: *"I must preach the Kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent"* (*Luke 4:43*). If Jesus is sending us as the Father sent him, then this is the absolute core message that we have to declare – the message of the Kingdom of God. God is going to transform things and Jesus was sent not only as the herald of that – a task in which we as his followers now join him – but also as the inaugurator of that Kingdom – a task which he has completely fulfilled in his death and resurrection, so we don't need to worry about doing that bit.

Then Jesus breathed out and said *"Receive the Holy Spirit."* As ever, God doesn't call his followers to do anything without providing the resources. In *John 1:32-34* we read of Jesus' baptism and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. And a couple of chapters later on, Jesus himself says this: *"The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit"* (*John 3:34*). As we take up the challenge that Jesus lays before us – and, to be honest, it's not that much of a challenge because Jesus has promised his presence and his help – Jesus actually fills us with his very own Holy Spirit. He provides the resources we need to do the job he's given us. The Spirit can bring boldness, wisdom, insight, courage – whatever it is we need to do the job – just when we need it.

Questions for discussion

- 1) Try to imagine how the disciples must have felt before Jesus arrived in the room. Share your thoughts as a group.
- 2) The word "mission" is based on a Latin word meaning "sent". Do you have a sense of being sent as a follower of Jesus?
- 3) How do you understand Jesus' words in *v21* ?
- 4) What difference does the Holy Spirit make in the lives of Jesus' disciples – then and now?
- 5) What does Jesus mean by what he says in *v23* ? Is it a basis for the practice of confession to a priest (as in, for example, the Catholic Church)? Why/why not?